

First Methodist Episcopal Church
(Niobrara Public Library)
East side of 4th Avenue
Niobrara
Knox County
Nebraska

HABS No. NE-25

HABS,
NEB,
54-NIOB,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NE-25

FIRST METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH (Niobrara Public Library)

- Location: East side of Fourth Avenue, 175' south of intersection with Maple Street, Niobrara, Knox County, Nebraska. Moved to the new third town site of Niobrara in the late 1970s.
- USGS Niobrara Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 14.579670.4733590.
- Present Owner: U.S.A. (Jurisdiction of the Corps of Engineers, Department of the Army).
- Present Use: Vacant, scheduled to be demolished (moved to third townsite of Niobrara after this documentation was written in 1977).
- Significance: The Methodist Episcopal Church was built circa 1880 in the original waterfront town of Niobrara. In 1881-82, the church, along with many other structures, was moved to a "new" townsite after the disastrous flood of 1881. It is today one of the few remaining moved structures.

According to minutes recorded at the turn of the century, the congregation was never strong and there were often membership problems. The church was eventually abandoned by its members in 1928 and the building was sold to the Niobrara Public Library Association in 1935. The first library facility in Niobrara opened in 1935 and continued to serve the community until the 1970s.

The church is a representative example of the standard plan and form of similar churches all over Nebraska, having a symmetrical plan, gable roof and Gothic Revival elements.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The church was built in 1880.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Before its move to the new townsite of Niobrara in the late 1970s, the church stood on lot 12 of block 3, Graves Addition to West Niobrara. This lot was purchased by William R. Cross, a trustee of the church, on August 10, 1881, as the second site for the moved church. Title was transferred to the trustees of the church on January 18, 1882.

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The congregation was dissolved in the early 1930s and title was deeded to the Nebraska Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1935, who in turn deeded it to the Niobrara Public Library Association in September of that year.

The structure served as the Niobrara Public Library until the town's move to the new townsite in the late 1970s. The building is now owned by the Historical Society of Niobrara. The original and subsequent owners of lot 12, block 3, Graves' Addition from the Register of Deeds, Center, Knox County, Nebraska are as follows:

- 1881 Deed August 10, 1881, recorded August 12, 1881, Book D Page 351, J. T. Huff and wife to William R. Cross. Sale of numerous properties for \$80.00
- 1882 Deed January 18, 1882, recorded January 18, 1882, Book D Page 508, William R. Cross and wife to Trustees of Methodist Episcopal Church (William R. Cross, J. C. Thomas J. S. Eakens, J. C. Santee, F. Gorton). For consideration of \$1.00
- 1882 Mortgage March 15, 1882, recorded March 25, 1882, Book B Page 274, First Methodist Episcopal Church of Niobrara to The Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. For consideration of \$300 plus 6% interest, to be paid by October 1, 1885 (Release December 31, 1901, recorded January 13, 1902 in Book 8, Page 483)
- 1934 Quit Claim Deed October 9, 1934, recorded May 15, 1935, Book 63 Page 96, Clara H. Van Vorhis and husband to Nebraska Annual Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church. For consideration of \$1.00
- 1934 Quit Claim Deed October 15, 1934, recorded May 15, 1935, Book 63 Page 97, Alice L. Weatherby and husband to Nebraska Annual Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church. For consideration of \$1.00
- 1934 Quit Claim Deed October 15, 1934, recorded May 15, 1935, Book 63 Page 98, Willard H. Graves and wife to Nebraska Annual Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church. For consideration of \$1.00
- 1935 Trustee Deed May 13, 1935, recorded May 15, 1935, Book 63 Page 98. Transfer of Title to Nebraska Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church

1935 Warranty Deed September 23, 1935, recorded October 8, 1935, Book 63 Page 152, Nebraska Annual Conference of Methodist Episcopal Churches to Niobrara Public Library Association. For consideration of \$275.

1970 Corporate Deed Book 90 Page 657, Niobrara Public Library Association to Village of Niobrara

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Unknown.
5. Original plan and construction: No record of Church's original plan or appearance was found.
6. Alterations and additions: A comment appearing in the Niobrara Pioneer, April 29, 1889, is the first historical data which gives an idea that the original appearance of the church had been altered considerably. The article reads as follows:

"Those who availed themselves of the opportunity of attending Easter Services at the Methodist Episcopal Church on Sunday, will always feel amply repaid by the performance of so simple a duty. On entering the church From either door, one was"

In 1909, a major remodeling plan was initiated which resulted in "practically a new church when completed." The improvements amounted to almost \$1,600 (Niobrara Tribune, November 11, 1909), which included "a new roof, new windows, a tower and corner edifice," among other things (church minutes, 1909). According to the Tribune, "plastering work on the church is being done by J. E. Stocking of Columbus." (Niobrara Tribune, October 21, 1909).

In March 1910, a large new bell arrived to be installed in the tower, according to the Niobrara Tribune, March 1910. An old but undated view of the Library, appearing in the Niobrara Centennial Book, page 51, shows the tower still on the structure. It is unknown when this tower was removed but it most likely occurred when the congregation dissolved and the structure was sold to the Niobrara Public Library Association in 1935.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The following selective material from the North Nebraska Conference Minutes and the publication, A History of Abandoned Methodist Churches in the Norfolk District of the Nebraska Conference, provides an important insight into the stability of the church.

The earliest records of the church are from 1884 when D. C. Winship was appointed to the Niobrara charge. Upon arriving he found only twelve members but "a great revival broke up vicious arguments and added a large number to the church....Niobrara remained in fairly good charge for a number of years and was served by some of our best men."

In 1894, it was reported, "The charge had a year of peace and prosperity," and in the years immediately following, a "good revival was had and considerable progress was made."

The years between 1898 and 1902 were hard, however, and a discouraging situation prevailed.

"At Niobrara we have met with some rather severe disappointments in the way of removal of members, failure in business and county seat contests, which have served to deplete our ranks and unsettle and discourage those that remain that finances will not nearly reach our expectations.

Reverend E. E. Hunt has labored incessantly and heroically and has made probably as much as any one could out of that which he has had to do with. The congregations have been held together, closing up the depleted ranks and strengthening what remained; the Sunday school and league are prosperous, and this charge, along with several about it, will do more than usual for benevolences this year, through the personal efforts of this young apostle of our connectional work. We expect to strengthen Niobrara next year with a part of the Verdell Circuit." 1899, page 65.

"Niobrara is a discouraging field. We once had a very aggressive and desirable church here, and it ought to be said that a few of The Salt of the Earth still remain. But our ranks have been depleted by deaths, removals and backslidings until the Society is discouragingly small. For years a county seat contest, in one form or another, has unsettled the population in this place." 1900, page 78.

From then on, the congregation had its ups and downs. In 1902, with the help of a new minister and a new railroad, prospects looked a little brighter. However, just five years later, the annual report stated, "Niobrara is a town with a population of 500 and a saloon for every hundred. It is in the midst of a Bohemian settlement running twenty miles east and west and twenty miles south of the Missouri River, as distinctly foreign as is possible to find under the stars and stripes."

The congregation was able to join together in order to accomplish their major renovation; however, by the 1920s, the congregation was failing and the church was finally abandoned in 1928.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Photo on page 51, Niobrara Centennial 1856-1956, showing church with bell tower.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, Register of Deeds, Center, Knox County, Nebraska.

Interviews:

C. Edwin Murphy, Curator, Nebraska United Methodist Historical Center, Lincoln, Nebraska. Telephone conferences August 10, 1977, August 11, 1977; correspondence, August 15, 1977. Source of North Nebraska Conference Minutes.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Andreas, A. T. History of the State of Nebraska. Vol. II. Chicago: The Western Historical Company, 1882.

Antrim, E.T. A History of Abandoned Methodist Churches in the Norfolk District of the Nebraska Conference. Publication Date, 1943. (Date not indicated in booklet, 1943 date from Mr. C. Edwin Murphy.)

Niobrara Bicentennial Committee. Niobrara Centennial 1856-1956 (updated 1976). Niobrara, Nebraska: Verdigre Eagle, 1976.

Prepared by: Kathryn Burns
Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
Summer 1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The First Methodist Episcopal Church is a simple wooden frame structure with clapboarded siding and lancet windows. It is a typical example of the standard plan and form seen throughout Nebraska, having a symmetrical plan, gable roof and Gothic Revival elements.
2. Condition of fabric: The condition of the church ranges from good to excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The rectangular-shaped church measures 26' x 41', with a vestibule, 9' x 12'. It is a one story structure with a half basement.
2. Foundations: The church has a coarsed rubble cement foundation.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The walls are covered with six-inch wide white clapboards.
4. Structural system, framing: The church's structural system is of wooden frame construction.
5. Stoop: Two concrete steps lead to the front door of the church. The original plan had what appears to be an open entryway with front door set back approximately two to three feet.
6. Chimneys: One brick chimney is at the rear; most likely added when the heating system was changed.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The original front entrance to the church, at west location, appears to have been an open entryway with a simple entablature-like surround. In 1909, it was enclosed by a tower, and its original white painted six-panel door was set back approximately three to four feet. The tower, as previously mentioned, was removed circa 1935, and was replaced by the present, smaller gabled entryway, which has a six-pane glass door with double-pane side lights.

- b. Windows: The west (front) facade is dominated by a triple lancet window with single lancet windows evenly spaced along the north and south elevations. All windows are patterned, translucent glass with simple gothic tracery and are operable double-hung sash windows.

A circular window appears in the gable on the west facade centered just above the triple lancet windows. Another circular window is found on the north side of what originally was the tower. Two other circular openings on the original bell tower can be seen in old views of the church, explaining the somewhat unbalanced fenestration which presently exists. (see Niobrara Centennial book, page 51). All windows have received the same decorative treatment, which consists of a wide unadorned surrounding molding with a narrow strip molding capping each opening. Patterned translucent glass panes are in each arched window. Clear glass is found in the circular windows.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The roof is gabled, covered with asphalt shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The roof has an overhang of approximately ten inches. The gable ends return on both the church and enclosed entrance. Unadorned eaves boards approximately one foot wide detail the roofline.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: A bell tower once stood over the entrance section and has since been removed. A one-story enclosed entryway is there now.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plan: A narrow entryway leads through double doors into a small 8' x 8' vestibule. Two swinging doors open into the church itself, which is approximately 26' x 40'. An elevated altar area is found at the east (rear) end of the structure.

A half basement with access through a rear exterior cellar door was probably dug out at a later date to house heating equipment.

- 2. Stairway: A cellar stairway of dimensional lumber is accessible through a rear door at the east end of the building.

3. Flooring: The flooring throughout the church consists of four-inch varnished wooden strips with simple eight-inch varnished wooden baseboards.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The church has pink painted rough plaster walls with contrasting pink plaster hipped ceiling which is separated by a molding along the roofline.
5. Doorways and doors: Swinging doors of varnished wood on the interior lead from the vestibule into the nave. These doors are similar to the original front doors, having six vertical raised panels.
6. Decorative features and trim: The most outstanding interior feature is the use of varnished dark stained woodwork detailing each window and door opening. A more elaborate treatment of the woodwork on the interior doorways is found with an egg-and-dart trim.
7. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: Both the central register and small floor registers along the sides provided forced-air heating.
 - b. Lighting: Gas fixture hookups remain in the vestibule. Modern fixtures, however, are now used throughout. A modern incandescent light is in the vestibule and suspended fluorescent lights are in the church area.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The First Methodist Episcopal Church (Library) faces west on 4th Avenue, approximately 175' south of the intersection of Maple Street and 4th Avenue. The church sits approximately 125' south of St. Paul's Episcopal Church and only two blocks east of the Presbyterian Church in Niobrara. These three churches were the first three churches in Niobrara.
2. Historic landscape design: Two large American Elm trees stand in front of the old library giving it a quaint appearance.

Prepared by: Perry Benson
Architect
Historic American Buildings
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Summer 1977
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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Niobrara project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in co-operation with the citizens of the Village of Niobrara. The project was funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District, in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the construction of the Gavins Point Dam and Lewis and Clark Lake. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, chief of HABS, the project was completed in the HABS Field Office in Niobrara, Nebraska during the summer of 1977 by project supervisor Perry Benson (University of Pennsylvania), project historian Kathryn A. Burns (George Washington University), team foreman Larry Jones (Texas Tech University) and student architects Peter Darlow (McGill University), Lisa Becker (Notre Dame University) and Darl Rastorfer (University of Pennsylvania). The written historical and architectural data was prepared by Kathryn Burns, and edited by Susan McCown, a historian in the HABS office in August 1979. One exterior photo was taken by Sam Amato in the fall of 1977.